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ABSTRACT

Seventeen Southern California school districts participated in a pilot study intended to develop a framework for classifying district policies on retaining students. It was assumed that differences in district policy created varying levels of objectification of standards for decision making and varying degrees of work effort needed to implement the policies. It was hypothesized that these variances influenced districts' retention rates. All districts participating in the pilot study provided a copy of their policy on elementary student retention and promotion and a count of students retained in 1987-88. Three classification variables were used. An objectification of standards scale ranged from silence on criteria to the use of standardized tests. Difficulty of policy implementation was assessed through two variables. An administrative work effort scale ranged from simple notification of parents to referral to a child study team. A child remediation work effort scale ranged from no required remediation to remediation before and after retention. In an effort to validate the framework, district policies and retention data of another 54 California school districts were analyzed. Findings from the 71 participating districts indicated significant correlations across grades 2-6 on objectivity of standards. Increased administrative work consistently inhibited retention rates, which declined markedly at upper elementary grade levels. (RH)

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An Analysis of Retention Policies and Their Possible Effects on Retention Rates[1]

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Abstract

Research evidence indicates that retention, requiring students to repeat a grade level, fails to raise achievement or enhance social and personal adjustment. Moreover, it does not produce homogenous classes, may be discriminatory, and is linked to dropping out. Retention continues, however, supported by public belief and sanctioned by district policy. Differences in district policy create varying degrees of work effort required to implement and varying levels of objectification of the standards used as a basis for decision-making. These differences, in turn, are hypothesized to influence the rate of retention in districts. Preliminary analysis provides limited support for the use of this framework in comparing district retention policies and retention rates.

An Analysis of Retention Policies and Their Possible Effects on Retention Rates

Introduction

Retention, repetition of grade level by low-achieving students, began in this country in the mid-1800's with mass compulsory education. Since then the practice has rollercoastered in and out of popularity. It is currently favored by the "competency movement", which views retention as a means of setting and enforcing standards for academic achievement.

Previous research on student retention addresses three questions: (1) does retention increase achievement?, (2) how does retention effect the affective concerns of retained students?, and (3) what type of students are retained?

To date, research evidence indicates that despite historical use and public support:

(1) Retention does <u>not</u> increase achievement. In fact, any improvement is temporary, with some studies indicating a deleterious effect both short and long term (Jackson, 1975; Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Holmes, 1989).

(2) Retention has an overall negative effect on affective concerns of retained children (Holmes, 1989). Students characterize retention as "flunking"and those who have been retained often are reluctant to admit it (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985).

(3) Retention is based on arbitary decisions that may be discriminatory towards younger, male, poor, black and hispanic students (Abidin, Gollaway, & Howerton, 1971).

(4) Retention is linked to eventually dropping out of school,above and beyond the influence of low-achievement (Grissom & Shepard, 1988; Rice, Toles, & Schultz, 1989).

No research has yet examined the role of school district policy on student retentions. From a policy perspective, centralized authority can be expected to play a major role in controlling the procedures and basis for retention decisions. School districts differ in the extent to which they exercise central control over student retention. Since research indicates retention is not beneficial for either children or school programs, the control retention policies exert on retention practices bears examination.

Retention policy analysis asks these questions: (1) Are there differences in retention policy content and language? (2) Do these differences predict district retention rates? (3) To what extent do other factors (e.g. district demography, staff beliefs or school program characteristics) also contribute to variations in district retention rates? A brief review of how rates are influenced by attitudes and school level differences in practice will set the stage for full review of the policy problem.

Attitudes Toward Retention

Among professionals and parents there is a prevalent and strong belief that retention is a necessary and valuable practice. A survey of elementary school teachers attending graduate school at one American University found that 97% agreed that retention can be a positive step in a child's education (Faerber, 1984).

More recently, Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986) surveyed parents, teachers and principals in one American city. Results showed that 59% of parents, 65% of teachers and 74% of principals felt that children should usually or always be retained (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). In fact, teachers who worried about the possible stigma of retention to the extent that they concealed a child's retention in classroom practice, still felt that retention was helpful to children (Byrnes, 1989).

Retention is commonly believed to improve education by allowing slower children "time to develop" and to increase accountability by requiring specific grade level proficiencies. Parents, teachers and principals surveyed in the Byrnes and Yamamoto study (1986) citied lack of basic skills as the number one reason justifing retention. Similarly, 68% of Americans in 1978 and 75% of Americans in 1983 in the Gallop Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools favored promotion from grade to grade by passage of an exam. By 1986, 72% of Americans favored making grade promotion more strict and in 1989, 70% favored requiring local schools to conform to national achievement standards and goals.

These belief systems are fueled by the anecdotal evidence of short-term improvement in some children and the inertia of established practice. Since retention disrupts neither school scheduling nor school structure, the increasing need for accountability can be satisfied without requiring system changes. Additionally, since retention costs are part of the general budget and not identifiable line item expenditures, they are not subject to budget politics (Furhman, 1990). Retention is a convenient but ineffective response to low-achievement, shored up by common beliefs that "something" is being done to help the child. These beliefs almost certainly influence both the adoption and

implementation of school district policies.

Retention Rates

Few data on retention rates per se are available at present. Estimates of national annual retention rates are anywhere between 5%-7% (Fuhrman, 1990) to 15%-19% (Smith & Shepard, 1987). Such estimates are based on counts of overage students from 1985-86 U.S. Census Bureau data and fluctuate due to different entrance ages and family transiency. Though retention rates in some states have risen dramatically in recent years, in Arizona from 3.5% in 1980 to 7.2% in 1986, fifteen states studied by Shepard and Smith (1989) averaged less than 1% change.

A clear picture of the retention problem requires calculation of cumulative retention rates, estimated to be close to 50% per cohort or age-mate group in some states (Shepard & Smith, 1989). As retention increases the need for additional teachers, facilities and materials at a factor roughly equal to the rate of retention (Balow & Schwager, 1990), retention increases educational costs for negligible educational outcomes.

Within the national average, retention rates across schools and districts vary widely. Achievement differences do not account for the extent of this variability. Staff beliefs and implementation practices may account for school to school differences in retention but probably do not account for fluctuations across districts. While unreliable and invalid decision-making by individual staff members accounts for considerable variability (Balow & Schwager, 1990), district rate differences are likely explained by differences in policy.

A test of differences of policy impact on district is possible if policy provisions

can be clearly delineated. This paper describes a conceptual model for the analysis of district retention policies. It describes policy characteristics that can be expected to influence actual retention practices in districts.

The Conceptual Model

All policies examined for this analysis had two common characteristics; (1) a statement of the expected normal progression of students from grade to grade with their cohort group, and (2) a recognition of the need to occasionally violate this expectation in individual cases. That is, retention policies all contain an affirmation of social promotion for the vast majority of students, and a provision for exceptions. Close examination of differences in district policies reveals specific provisions governing how these exceptions are to be made and what basis for exceptions should be.

Pilot work in conjunction with review of the literature suggests two important consequences of retention policy variation: (1) control over the amount of work required to implement the policy, and (2) the degree of objectification of the standards that are used for making retention decisions.

Difficulty of Implementation

The amount of work effort involved in policy implementation has two components: procedural or administrative work and programmatic or child remediation work. Administrative work results from elaborating the retention decision-making process by controlling such things as: (1) who is involved in the decision-making, (2) communication with parents, and (3) the number of meetings

required. Policies range from requiring simple notification of the parent (the minimum required by law), to a required parent conference, to referral to a Child Study Team.

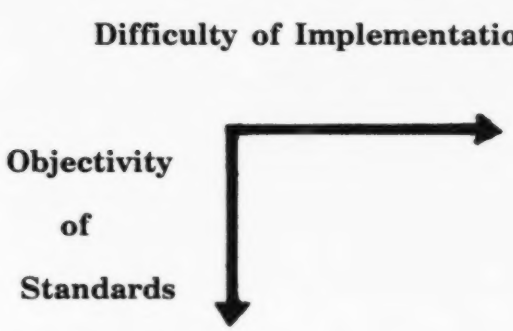
Group decision-making processes may affect retention decision outcomes. This may be especially true when the professional judgments of a team of professionals is used for decision-making rather than a test-based standard (Nikalson, 1984). As more people, more interactive communication, and repeated meetings become part of the retention decision-making process, the time and work effort for policy implementation increases.

The second component of work effort, child remediation, involves specific instructional support programs for retained students, either prior to the decision to retain or in the retention year. Policy language used to decribe child remediation programs includes: an "Individualized Learning Plan", "written learning goals", a "remedial plan", "instructional strategies", or most commonly, an "Individualized Education Plan" (IEP). Remediation efforts before retention can be considered part of normal classroom processes for low-achieving or at-risk students. However, once the decision to retain has been made, retention itself is often considered sufficient intervention. Whether retention is viewed as sufficient or individualized remediation pre- or post retention (or both) is viewed as a necessary adjunct, results in substantive differences in actual student experiences and district work effort.

Despite the increased complexity and costs of this type of policy provision, there is some evidence in the literature that the use of retention in conjunction with an IEP increases achievement (Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987). An IEP,

with an IEP increases achievement (Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987). An IEP, in conjunction with promotion with agemates regardless of achievement levels, may be an even more effective intervention than retention alone, retention with an IEP, or social promotion alone. Student educational experiences positively affecting achievement may be better accounted for by the use of an IEP than by retention.

As the work required for policy implementation, as expressed through administrative and child remediation requirements, increases, district retention rates are hypothesized to decrease. This policy element is represented in the figure below as "difficulty of implementation".



Objectification of Standards

The second dimension of policy variation, objectification of the retention decision standards, is shown in the figure above. Objectification of decision-making is determined by specific policy provisions. District policy language ranges from a minimum of total silence on criteria for decision-making, to a general specification of assessment factors or areas to be considered, to a high level of objectification expressed in the use of standardized tests as the primary basis for the retention decision. As the level of objectification of the standards increases on this

also.

At the lowest level of objectivity, there are no stated standards, no specific measures stated for use in assessments, or no stated factors upon which to rate students or to help define or focus the decision. The responsibility for the retention decision is placed solely on the decision-makers. This results in some measure of personal accountability, hypothesized to deter retentions.

Policies of mid-level objectivity explicitly state areas to assess (such as academic achievement, social and emotional development) and or criteria within these areas (such as attendance, achievement test scores, student's study habits and attitudes, age and grade placement of siblings) to consider in decision-making. Specific assessment tools such as proficiency or minimum competency test scores or a rating scale such as Light's Retention Scale (Light, 1981) may be required to focus professional judgments and document decision-making. The key to this focusing process is that elements are specified, but cut-off scores are not. Though the validity of some tools may be questionable, they still serve to focus and define the judgments of the school personnel involved in making the retention decision.

Such assessment tools also tend to shift responsibility for the retention decision to defined scales and objective measures, so school personnel become less personally accountable for the decision to retain. Teachers, principals and other school personnel are hypothesized to find it easier to retain children when objective documentation replaces complex personal judgments.

Use of standardized tests (either district, state, or nationally developed), as a primary factor in retention decisions represents the highest level of objectification. In this type of policy the professional judgments of school personnel

are secondary to the child's performance on an objective test. Mandated levels of performance are set for each grade promotion and strict policy implementation would require retention of all students not able to achieve scores at the required level.

Such policies explicitly state a standard for achievement, i.e. a measure to be used and a required level. "Each student shall be expected to accomplish 60% of the basic skills of the Pupil Progress Checklist," is an example of such a policy statement where 60% is the required performance level and the Pupil Progress Checklist is the district approved measure. "Students may pass from grade 1 to 2 when their achievement deficit is no more that 1/2 a year lower than grade level in reading" is also an example of an established level. Elsewhere in this same policy the district measure is stated, "student achievement will be reviewed and validated by ... scores on standardized achivement tests ... the student must score within the expected grade level range in reading". Such policies refer to minimum exit standards and often establish the required level separately from the measure to be used. Use of test scores to control the retention process almost completely displaces the burden of responsibility for the retention decision from personal judgments onto objective measures.

Documentation of the impact of minimum competency testing on retention rates suggests that this setting of test-based standards is a critical factor in retention policies. While 33 states had required minimum competency testing by 1978, setting of specific competency standards remains primarily a local prerogative. California, for example, conducts state testing but requires local school boards to adopt policy on student promotion and retention. Some of these district policies

incorporate minimum competency requirements as part of their retention policy. Examination of actual student scores on achievement tests mandated in policies of districts requiring specific performance levels suggests higher levels of retention in such districts.

Method

Seventeen southern California school districts, ranging in size from under 700 to almost 30,000 students, participated in piloting for this analysis. All districts provided a copy of their district policy on elementary student retention/promotion and a count of retained students for 1987-88. An analysis of these policies led to the development of a classification system which was used for further comparison with district retention rates.

Following development of the classification framework, a selection of an additional 54 California school district policies on student retention/promotion and the most current retention data available to these districts (1987-88 or 1988-89) were analyzed for preliminary validation of the framework. These districts were part of a random sample of 183 California school districts, stratified on district size and wealth, currently participating in a collaborative study by the California State Department of Education and the California Educational Research Cooperative on student retention/promotion. Further analysis in this larger study will include examination of retention rates, site implementation of district policies and examination of policies in relation to retention rates and will be reported on after conclusion of the study.

Measures

The three classification variables, objectification of the standards used in

retention decision-making, level of administrative work effort and level of child remediation work effort were operationalized by the use of rating scales developed solely for that purpose.

Through examination of the pilot policies, objectification of standards was represented by a 7 point scale ranging from silence on criteria for decision-making to the use of standardized tests with cut-off scores for making retention decisions.

OBJECTIFICATION OF STANDARDS:
1 = Silent on criteria
2 = Categories for assessment given, but no content of categories described
3 = One or more category of analysis with content specified
4 = Categories for assessment given, no content described but combined with references to assessment instrument
5 = Categories for assessment given, content specified and assessment instrument referenced
6 = Assessment instrument used as primary basis for decision-making but no minimum standard set or cut-off scores stated.
7 = Assessment instrument including grades used as primary basis for decision-making with specified cut off scores or minimum standard set

Difficulty of policy implementation is developed through two components, the first of which is administrative work effort. Administrative work effort was represented by a 4 point scale ranging from simple notification of parents (minimum required by law) to referral to a Child Study Team process.

ADMINISTRATIVE WORK EFFORT
1 = Nothing or notification of parent required
2 = Consultation between parent and school either as "explanation" or "thorough discussion" (uni-directional communication process)
3 = Required conference with parent or other notification requiring an interchange between parent and school (bi-directional communication process)
4 = School Assessment Team/Child Study Team referral so that any other structure for consultation is used

involving anyone beyond the parent-teacher-principal. This involves requests for approval from the district or school psychologist.

The second component, that of child remediation was represented by a 4 point scale ranging from no required remediation to remediation both pre- and post-retention.

CHILD REMEDIATION WORK EFFORT
1 = Nothing
2 = Post-retention remediation plans required to be developed
3 = Pre-retention remediation plans required to be developed
4 = Both post and pre-retention remediation plans required to be developed

Policy Ratings

Two policy raters were used, one a professional experienced in dealing with educational policy and the other a doctoral student in education. Preliminary analysis indicates that stable policy ratings can be made using this framework. Differences were resolved through discussion between raters and consensus ratings were used for prelminary analysis with the retention rate data.

The 71 polices rated had a mean objectivity rating of 4, mean administrative difficulty of 3 and mean remediation of 2.1. Both objectivity and remediation showed a bi-modal distribution and administrative difficulty had a strong negative skew. Though raters distinguished clear policy differences, there were an insufficient number of policies rated at one and six for analysis. Ratings 1 and 2 and ratings 6 and 7 were collapsed on objectivity, approximating a more normal distribution for further analysis. Frequencies, mean retention rates and standard deviations for rates for each group appear in Tables 1 and 2 (See Appendix).

Retention Rates

Retention rates were computed by adjusting total district enrollment by type of district to convert all district rates to those for elementary grades only. District promotion policies differ at middle, junior high, and high school level as promotion is generally viewed as passing a specific number of units and retention is not across all subjects but subject specfic. Overall retention rates ranged from one district's high of 18% to four districts with no retentions (mean rate = 2.14%). The highest rate was almost twice the next highest retention rate, was also highest in district wealth, and when included in analysis resulted in the wealth measure (district revenue limits) being the best predictor of district retention rates ($R^2 = .40$). Subsequent removal of this district from data analysis resulted in no significant relationship between district wealth and retention rates.

Retention Policies and Their Relationship to Retention Rates

Using the conceptual framework presented, retention policy differences were compared to variation in district retention rates. This preliminary analysis with the 71 district policies and retention data indicates limited support for the use of this framework for analysis.

Significant correlations were found for one classification variable, the level of objectivity of standards for retention decision-making. This held across grade levels 2 through 6. As shown in Figure 1. (Appendix) regression analysis for this variable on 1-6 rates showed a substantial group of policies rated at the lowest level of objectivity with a large variation in retention rates. These policies were

silent on criteria or expressed minimum criteria as a basis for retention decision-making. At this level of policy development, minimum control of practice results in individual judgements and belief systems being the major determinant of practice, with little relationship between policy and practice and large variability in rates (mean= 1.1%, S.D.= .96%).

As policies were rated at lower mid-level objectivity, rates are lower (mean=.045) and there is less variance (S.D.= .35). Enaction of the control processes for retention results in lower rates with less variability. As objectivity ratings increased from that point, both retention rates and the variation in retention rates increase. At the highest objectivity rating, 5, the mean rate= 2.0% and S.D.= 1.7%. Thus, with the exertion of moderate policy control in terms of criteria and standards used as a basis for decision-making, policy works to decrease retentions and decrease variation in practice. Some centralized control over retention processes in terms of objectification of standards and specification of criteria for decision-making results in policy compliance. At higher levels of centralized control, however, attempts to "tighten the screws," or to exert increasing amounts of central control over practice results in increased retentions and increased non-compliance, seen as the increased variability in retention rates.

Though not reaching an adequate significance level, the variable representing administrative work effort is consistently negatively correlated with retention rates across grades 1-6. This pattern, though not providing support for the use of the classification framework for analysis with retention rates, indicates that increased administrative work as defined by this analysis consistently inhibits retention.

Child remediation provisions are found largely in policies mandating

objectified retention criteria, that is, the level of objectivity of standards used in decision-making and child remediation covaried significantly with the child remediation variable (r=.52). This is not completely unexpected. Case studies of districts instituting minimum competency test-based promotion policies, such as New York City's Promotional Gates Program described by House (1989), attest to the necessary concern of providing remediation to accompany test failure. Students not receiving adequate remediation fail competencies repeatedly.

A final consideration is the marked drop found in retention rates at upper elementary grade levels. Most retention policies explicitly state two limitations on retention; students will not be retained more than once in a single grade, and students will not be retained more than twice in their school careers. These factors, added to the common belief that retention is most effective in primary grades, mean older students are much less likely to be retained than younger ones.

Kindergarten rates, a phenomenon overwhelmingly confounded by behavioral and developmental considerations more than academic were unique in this analysis, not following the pattern found at the other grade levels.

Discussion and Implications

As an educational policy, retention has historically been a solution to student failure. Originated as a policy to segment low-ability students when this country began bulk education, retention practices give the appearance of accountability and enforcement of standards without intervening in the underlying problem, that of low achievement. School personnel may feel that retaining a child is "doing something" for that child, leading to non-use of effective alternatives or blaming of

the child for failure. These beliefs commonly exist despite evidence indicating the possible deterimental short and long-term effects of retention on children. As an organizational solution, retention is convenient as costs can be hidden in the general education budget and no change in system structure is required for implementation.

Preliminary analysis of retention policies indicates that, though classification according to projected district implementation costs and level of displacement of responsibility for student failure is possible, the influence of such policy differences on retention rates is negligible. Further investigations will address refined analysis of a larger sample of district policies and retention rates as distributed by student gender and ethnic background. Policy variation in terms of complexity of policy development and implementation variables will be explored. Since retention directly impacts student experience, development of educational policies that effectively deal with the underlying issues of retention (such as low achievement and student competency), need to replace those that attempt to intervene to student detriment.

Appendix

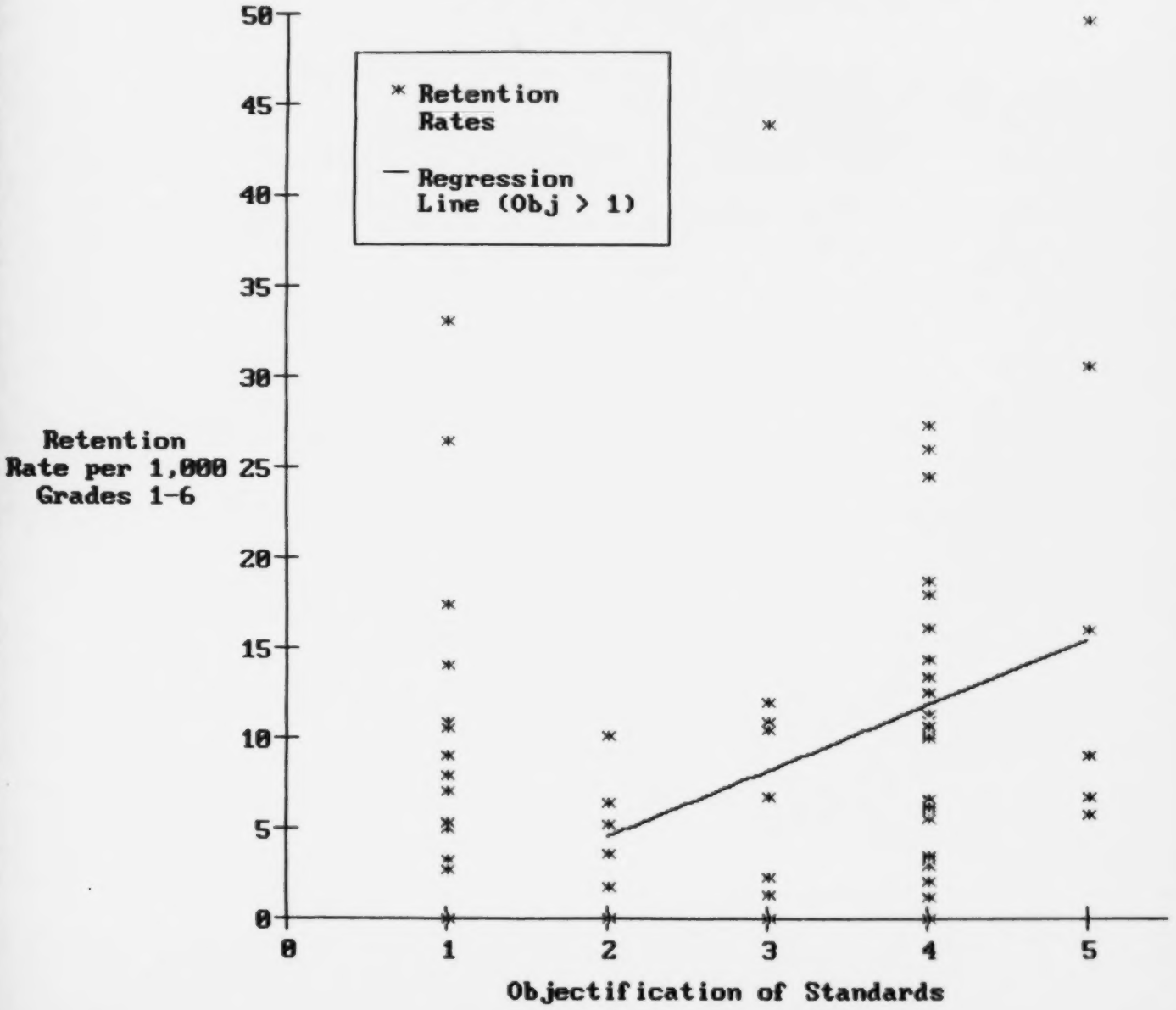
Table 1. Frequencies, mean retention rates and standard deviations for Objectification of Standards and Administrative Difficulty.

		Administrative Difficulty						
		1	2	3	4	N	Mean	S.D.
Objectification of Standards	1	2	8	6	2	18	1.1	.82
	2	0	0	2	4	6	.45	.36
	3	0	1	3	6	10	1.1	1.2
	4	0	11	9	11	31	1.0	.75
	5	0	0	3	3	6	2.0	1.7
	N	2	20	23	26	71		
	Mean	1.2	1.0	1.1	1.1			
	S.D.	.73	.81	.94	1.1			

Table 2. Frequencies, mean retention rates and standard deviations for Objectification of Standards and Remediation.

		Remediation						
		1	2	3	4	N	Mean	S.D.
Objectification of Standards	1	16	1	1	0	18	1.1	.82
	2	2	1	3	0	6	.45	.36
	3	4	2	3	1	10	1.1	1.2
	4	11	2	15	3	31	1.0	.75
	5	1	0	1	4	6	2.0	1.7
	N	34	6	23	8	71		
	Mean	1.0	.86	.84	2.2			
	S.D.	.79	.27	.73	1.7			

Student Grade Level Retention Rates



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